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Drink From the Jar

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During my years as an undergraduate at UK concentrating on Appalachian Studies, I have, as well, studied writing through classes with Rebecca Howell, James Hall, and Gurney Norman. The work here is part of two collections that are approaching the intersection of experience, history, and home. My home is Girdler, Kentucky (Knox County), and while attending school here in Lexington I have participated in the Robinson Scholars Program and the Gaines Fellowship Program. My learning with Rebecca Howell led to work with *Wind: A Journal of Writing & Community*, of which I am now an Editor. I edited *Wind*'s most recent issue, #94. That issue spotlights the Hindman Writers Workshop, a community of which I am a dedicated member.



Mentor:
Rebecca Howell
 Lecturer, Creative Writing, Department of English
 Director, Women Writers of Kentucky

Erik spends his free time memorizing maps of Kentucky. From the passenger side of a truck, down the most rural, unmarked road, he can take you home again. An unimaginable left turn here, a deft right there.

After having worked with Erik for four years now, as a poetry writing student, as an intern with the women writers conference, as an apprenticing editor, and now as a Gaines Fellow, I can say without hesitation that, for Erik, study is a sacred opportunity to better understand, and when called upon, defend, that which is most important to him — his home. These early poems of his, published here, are just a glimpse of a larger, maturing, body of work in which he consistently approaches the occasion of a poem in the same way he does those maps: whether he is writing in the voice of a coal miner's son or the ancient Gilgamesh, to Erik, every poem is an opportunity to get back home — and more, to quietly, deftly, bring us with him.

Drink From the Jar

Red-Handed

—young boys in the mountains used to work in the coal mines, pulling impurities out of the coal coming out of the mine into the trucks. The sharp slate cut their hands so much that the tops of coal trucks were stained red, and received the name red tops.

1

They stood on ladders,
 rickety piles of dead Chestnut
 the boys climb
 the dry-rotted bodies — ladders
 ladders to nowhere
 ending up no place, dropping off to no world
 they'd climb up
 to look down at their bloody hands
 blood, to pay for the house
 blood, to pay for the food that keeps Papaw out
 of the cold soft dirt
 they do it — ravens to snatch up
 shards of slate
 pieces of jagged shale.

2

means of life
come from pure hair-black coal
No gray
Only shining black, like hogs cry for at night
the boys know though
it ain't that pure black they get,
what they get's a bloody chalkboard
like looking at a new moon from inside a pomegranate
when they do it, razor shale cuts their hands
the boys' blood pours out on top
leaks out from in between stubby coal-clouded fingers
cakes up when their tears drip down
to where they should fall off elbows
but instead they flow down and across
leave white tracks, unbalanced lines down forearms
fall into palm pools.
Sticky blood makes movement hard
tops it all with red.

3

I dreamed I was the little boys' mommy
when they came home with
hollowed out souls and
scooped out palms
I screamed and ran to them — all I could see was when they were born
I saw their tiny hands stretching and gripping in the air
strings of afterbirth
flashy red on their hands
In a moment like this here one
my tears came again and I mourned the day they even came to me
I licked their hands
try to zip them back up
with my open hoping lips
I kissed their hands when they cried
minutes old and they stopped
now, they just get louder.

4

I dreamed
I was one — a little boy on a chestnut corpse lifting out slate
and I lost my brother, my brother was gone
I went looking for him
in dark morning's clouds
where lizards hide their fallen blue tails and I saw him
but not the one I looked for
I saw a boy on a horse on a hill
sitting, face hanging down
maybe on his horse he could take me
to my lost brother
crying in closets
over his burning red hands
I walked up
saw his shining black hair — but there was no light
felt his heart
heart that lay holy in his fallen face
tears rolled and he was from home
Could not find it in the red sandstones blocking his way
he looked up and in his face was my brother's face
the face that knew me in a way no other ever would
here is my brother
black with the dust of deep deep earth
and his eyes wide open & white
His cheeks smeared
red lines finger-wide
I looked down and my hands were gone
I can still smell them.

Laying in the Mine

here, cold, on my belly
Stretching me out,
to where I feel like I'll fall into the sky— up through the ground
so I grab a hold, my fingers squeezing on black earth bones

My body forgets
but in the moving I remember in February cold
Six quilts down
Mom would lay with me and whisper quiet
every so often she'd drift off
but it was lonely without the whites of her eyes
I would tap just so little on her cheek
and she would wake up and talk
and then, there under the six quilts I wasn't lonely

Now I remember what Danny told me when I started in the mines
He was tapping a seam with a pick and he said
hush now...if you listen the vein speaks
But now out of the six quilts
I lay down the pick
tap this seam and wait.

Foxfire

here with the garden
in the turn up of onion rows
in the water snap of cucumbers,
I remember that love is a man's hands
finger deep in cool dirt in June
that when I reach into the ground
the dirty fingernails of my grandfathers reach back up

In the dark, on my way to bed,
the garden is where I'm last
finishing the rows up
I turn the soil over
to the green glow of foxfire
shining — I'm sure — from God's broad hand.